

Rereading Catullus

John Ferguson

*VIVAMVS. mea Lesbia, atque amemus.
rumoresque senum seueriorum
omnes unius aestimemus assis!
soles occidere et redire possunt:
nobis cum semel occidit brevis lux,
nox est perpetua una dormienda.
da mi basia mille, deinde centum,
dein mille altera, dein secunda centum,
deinde usque altera mille. deinde centum,
dein, cum milia multa fecerimus,
conturbabimus ilia. ne sciamus.
aut ne quis malus inuidere possit,
cum tantum sciat esse basiorum.*

*Come my Celia, let us prove,
While we may, the sports of love;
Time will not be ours for ever;
He at length our goods will sever.
Spend not then his gifts in vain,
Suns that set may rise again;
But if once we lost this light,
'Tis with us perpetual night. . .*

Volpone's song in Ben Jonson is not of course the only version of Catullus' fifth poem. This justly famous piece has echoed down the ages. Horace and Martial recall it; so does Ausonius. When the French vernacular comes into its own Ronsard and de Baif are charmed by its directness:

*Vivons, Mignarde, vivons
Et suivons
Les ébats, qu'Amour nous donne
Sans que, des vieux rechignez
Renfrognez
Le sot babil nous estonne.*

In England it is a theme of the madrigalists, Campion and Corkine. We catch its music in Carew and Drummond, Sherburne and Prior, Waller's *Phyllis* and Marvell's *Coy Mistress*. Like Jonson, Crashaw half-translates it. It is the ancestor of all the 'Come live with me and be my love' verses, of Marlow, of Raleigh, of John Donne's characteristic *The Baite* and

Herrick's pastoral 'Live, live with me', down to Day Lewis's bitter little version from the economic depression of the 1930's:

*Come. live with me and be my love,
And we will all the pleasures prove
Of peace and plenty. bed and board,
That chance employment may afford.*

*I'll handle dainties on the docks
And thou shalt read of summer frocks:
At evening by the sour canals
We'll hope to hear some madrigals.*

*Care on thy maiden brow shall put
A wreath of wrinkles, and thy foot
Be shod with pain: not silken dress
But toil shall tire thy loveliness*

*Hunger shall make thy modest zone
And cheat fond death of all but bone –
If these delights thy mind may move,
Then live with me and be my love.*

Living and dying

The details of Catullus' writing merit the closest attention. The first line of all, at first blush immediate and light-hearted, contains an ambiguity. *Atque* might almost be taken as 'i.e.': *vivere* in one sense means no more than *amare*. But before we have gone far we realize that *vivamus* is pointed and poignant; it contrasts with death. In the middle of the love-life is Lesbia, 'my Lesbia', for the adjective means that he joins her there. In the next line the play on *r* and *s* represents the growling and hissing of the old men. Then comes the effective juxtaposition of *omnes unius*. The verbal conjunction expresses a fundamental tension. The first three lines begin from the lovers (*vivamus*) and end with the trivial circle of a coin (*assis*). The next three begin from the great circle of the sun (*soles*) and end with the lovers reduced to nothing (*dormienda*). *Occidere et redire* balances *vivamus atque amemus*.

But there is contrast. The movement of the sun lives: perhaps for that reason *soles* in the plural, a kind of myth of reincarnation. *Possunt* is strong, a verb of power. *Soles* is set starkly against *nobis*. So we come to the marvellous shortening of *occidit brevis lux*, three syllables, two syllables, one syllable – and then nothing; the striking juxtaposition of *lux* and *nox* so that day becomes night; the long *perpetua* after the three abrupt monosyllables; the elision *perpetua una* with the long extended *u* sound; the repeated final *a*; the quiescent leisurely *dormienda*. For sleep is the opposite of making love: plenty of time for sleeping when we are

dead. Then comes a masterstroke of contrast. *Da mi* picks up the two short syllables of *dormiēda* and lengthens them. Life is momentarily restored.

One of the themes of Greek philosophy was the tension between the One and the Many. Something of this appears here. The first three lines express the limitations (*unius . . . assis*) of traditional moralism; the next three show death as the final boundary of life (*nox . . . una*). In the rest of the poem the stress is on the Many, the unlimited, and Catullus allows his final section one more line than the previous sequences of three lines each. Pleasure, in much ancient thought, belongs to the domain of the unlimited. Catullus is thus whimsically siding with hedonism against philosophical ethics and the moral disapprobation of a past generation.

Counting and losing count

The last part of the poem becomes clearer if we realize that it is linked to normal Roman methods of counting (*fecerimus*, a seemingly noncommittal word, is also a technical term from accounting), either with the abacus or on the fingers. The former, the placing of pebbles on a board in the appropriate column, would be the normal way of dealing with large numbers.

This would be obviously appropriate, and it makes easy sense of *conturbabimus* – knock the board, or ruffle the pebbles with the fingers and their position, and consequently the sum, is lost.

Finger-counting, however, explains the poem in terms of a series of gestures, which enrich the meaning and link the two parts of the poem. For the sign for one was bending the little finger of the left hand, the unlucky hand, and there is some evidence that this finger was used for an abusive or obscene gesture, appropriate to Catullus and Lesbia's view of the value of the old men's advice! 1000 was expressed by bending the little finger of the right hand, 100 by touching the thumb of the right hand with the forefinger. This had a number of secondary meanings: in Jerome's time it signified virginity, which would hardly be appropriate here. But it also was the gesture used in kissing your hand in adoration and this would be wholly appropriate. The whole sequence of gestures would end with a gesture to avert the evil eye.

There is no reason why we should not combine these explanations. Two people are involved. Lesbia operates the board. Catullus tells her what to do. He gesticulates towards the old men. He then kisses Lesbia 1000 times, gestures with his right hand, and she enters up the score. After the next 100 he kisses his hand to her with another gesture. So it goes on until he flutters his hands, she upsets the board, they both give a gesture to avert the evil eye and fall to, careless of anything or anyone.

At the end of the poem illwishers of a different and more sinister kind than the futile old men push into our consciousness. The old men could be dismissed for only a single *as*, but these must be made impotent by thousands of kisses. But impotent they become, and the last word

is with the kisses – *basiorum*. And they are special kisses, for it seems that Catullus introduced the word *basium* into the literary language of Rome.

*Qvaeris, quot mihi basiationes
tuae, Lesbia, sint satis superque,
quam magnus numerus Libyssae harenae
lasarpiciferis iacet Cyrenis
oraclum Iouis inter aestuosi
et Batti ueteris sacrum sepulcrum;
aut quam sidera multa, cum tacet nox,
furtiuos hominum uident amores:
tam te basia multa basiare
uesano satis et super Catullo est.
quae nec pernumerare curiosi
possint nec mala fascinare lingua.*

Kisses again: the seventh poem is a companion-piece to the fifth. There his passion has expressed itself in the desire to add thousands to hundreds of kisses. He now imagines Lesbia asking 'How many?' It is a cool question from a sophisticated society, and it demands a cool and sophisticated answer. The answer is of course 'Infinity', but it has to be presented in two familiar literary conceits, the infinite number of the sands and the stars. So Catullus gives his poem a careful structure. It is a formal question, delivered in two lines. Characteristically, even in these two brief lines he succeeds in introducing a new word of his own, *basiationes*, 'kissifications', and yet maintaining a light conversational touch in *satis superque*; it is not fanciful to see in the *ss* the murmuring of the lovers' lips, in the final *p* and *q* the breaking off. The answer then is formal too. It takes 10 lines, 4:2:4, marked by *quam*, *quam*, *tam*. The first two of these sections give the illustrations, the last formally answers the question, as is shown by the reprise of *basiare* and *satis et super* (9-10).

Brooding on dark thoughts

But the seventh poem is darker than the fifth. There nature was out of tune with the lovers. Here Catullus can force nature into his harmonies – but at what cost! Only the desert sand which leads to the dead tomb and the dark night harmonize. *Nox* has replaced *lux* in the previous poem, and although the falling cadence is not quite as striking, it is there – *tacet nox*, two syllables, one syllable passing into nothing. He too is stealing his love from time. The stars which are the infinite measure of his unique love, reveal to him that his love is not unique, but one among an indefinite number of *furtivos amores*. And whereas in the earlier poem he calls on Lesbia to kiss him freely, now he is imposing kisses on her, for *tuae* (2) is the equivalent of an objective genitive and *te* (9) is also the external object of *basiare*. One editor writes, 'In V Catullus is kissed by Lesbia, here he kisses her – a difference purely grammatical.' But it is not so; it is the difference between a free gift and an exacted tribute. Catullus is brooding on dark thoughts, not gay and careless. So he speaks of himself in the third person and as *vesano*; he is not *sanus*, and he knows it. And, when we look at the

structure of the poem again, he has rounded it off by line 10 in ringform. The last two lines are a dark addition. And the last word is not with the thought of the kisses ousting the evil eye and the malignant spell, but the thought of the spell itself. It is no accident that Catullus has set this poem immediately before 8 – or that he has placed 6 between the two poems of kissing.

The torrid sand

The first of the metaphors, the grains of sand, is expanded, and the details seem at first blush piled up as a parade of learning, such as we might expect from an imitator of Callimachus. And the hand of Callimachus is there: *Libyssae* and *lasarpiciferis* are Greek in form, and Cyrene was Callimachus's birthplace and Battus a name shared by his father and the ancient hero. Mere imitative learning, then? Not so when we look at details. Cyrene is 'silphium bearing' (4); the compound epithet is of Catullus's coining. The juice of the plant, whatever it was, was used by doctors according to the Elder Pliny, seemingly for hysteria and neurotic conditions. And Catullus is *vesanus* (10), and in need of the treatment. So too *aestuosus*. On the face of it 'torrid', but also 'hot -blooded', 'passionate'; the kisses are as numerous as the sand – and Jupiter in the middle of that sand knows all about kisses too: he is *omnivolus* in poem 68.

It is thus a total mistake to see in this poem, as have done some critics whom it would be unkind to name, 'an outburst of wild amorous passion', 'mere childlike delight in multitudinous kisses', or (most grotesque of all) 'a novitiate just entering an Elysium of love', and a double mistake to see its literary artifices as dragged in for decorative purposes. On the contrary this is a dark, ironic, controlled poem. Catullus's emotions are strongly engaged. He detaches himself from them; in a sense he almost makes himself one of the *curiosi* (7, 11), an outside spectator of his own love. Steele Commager has written with profound insight: 'The poem is not a lover's cry. It is intended to control the feelings that it expresses, and to control them by the very form in which it expresses them . . . Catullus the lover may be *vesanus*, but Catullus the poet is not. It is that distance that the poem creates, and insists upon.'

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